

Flathead County Trails Plan

draft, September 1, 2009

PATHS Advisory Committee

(People, Athletics, Travel, Health, and Safety)

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Executive Summary

Planning Process - The Flathead County Weed, Parks and Recreation Board created an advisory committee in 2008 to develop a trails plan. Convening in February of that year, the PATHS Advisory Committee (People, Athletics, Travel, Health, and Safety) met regularly for the next 18 months. Their planning process included: gathering public input through meetings, workshops and surveys; reviewing past trails efforts; developing goals and policies; creating base maps; meeting with a team of technical advisers; analyzing trail plans from other communities; developing a proposed trail network; recommending a strategy for administration and implementation of a new countywide trails program; and writing this trails plan.

Vision and Goals - The PATHS committee envisions a safe and convenient network of non-motorized trails connecting Flathead County communities, schools, parks and public lands for the benefit of our families, our economy and our environment.

The goals of the trails program are to:

- Create a continuous network of pathways and on-road facilities that connect residential areas, schools, parks, recreation areas, public lands, retail/business centers and community event centers.
- Provide opportunities for people to be physically active using trails as close-to-home recreational amenities, and ensure children have convenient and safe routes to schools.
- Connect major population hubs with each other via direct arterial trails that provide safe, efficient and enjoyable opportunities for non-motorized commuting.
- Provide high-quality non-motorized recreational trails primarily on public lands. Ensure connectivity between new recreational trails, existing trails in Flathead National Forest and Glacier National Park, and the rest of the county trail network.
- Increase the percentage of trips made by bicycling and walking in the county, reduce the number of traffic injuries, and increase the number of non-motorized trail users.
- Establish an effective administrative framework for the trail system.
- Ensure the trail network is well-maintained.
- Improve non-motorized safety through pedestrian, bicyclist and motorist education and enforcement.
- Use a variety of strategies to acquire sufficient funding to construct and maintain the proposed trail system within the next 20 years.

Proposed Trail Network - In this plan, the term ‘trail’ is used in a broad sense, referring to a variety of types facilities for non-motorized users, such as shared-use pathways, single-track trails, backcountry roads, and also routes along shared roadways, where bicyclists (and to a lesser extent pedestrians) are directed and accommodated. Some shared roadways may need no special facilities other than signage as a bike route, due to low traffic volumes and slow speeds. For others, wider shoulders or bike lanes are needed to provide an acceptable margin of safety.

The proposed trail network is displayed by the trails map, appendix M. The trails map identifies proposed trails in terms of their primary function: arterial trail, connector trail, or recreational trail, rather than specifying particular trail facilities. Arterial trails provide direct commuter routes between major communities. Connector trails provide safe, non-motorized transportation routes linking common destinations within and between communities. Recreational trails respond to the needs of communities throughout the county for close-to-home recreational amenities.

Priority Projects - Proposed trail construction and improvement projects are considered high priority based upon a defined set of criteria:

- Services existing and/or anticipated demand
- Provides needed safety improvement
- Provides access to schools
- Connects communities with parks/public lands
- Provides an attractive, off-road travel corridor
- Connects existing trail segments (enhances network continuity)
- Provides connection between communities
- Provides trailhead facilities
- Provides a high quality recreational experience

Priority trails in each of the three major network components are:

Arterial routes

- Somers to Lakeside (shared roadway)
- Whitefish Stage Road from Reserve Street in Kalispell to Whitefish (pathway)
- Hwy 40 from Whitefish to Columbia Falls (pathway)

Connector routes

- Airport Road/Foys Lake loop (pathway or shoulder bikeway)
- West Reserve Street, from Hwy 93 to Glacier High School (pathway)
- Echo Lake Road connecting the two existing Swan River pathways (pathway)
- Stillwater River past Flathead Valley Community College (pathway)
- Red Bridge restoration in Columbia Falls
- Kila to Marion rail-trail (pathway)

Recreational routes

- North Shore Flathead Lake from Somers to Big Fork (pathway)
- Foys-to-Blacktail system (backcountry trails and roads)
- Trail Runs Through It (backcountry trails)

“Bike route” signage shall be installed along all shared roadway trail routes. The purpose is to attract bicyclists to preferred routes and alert motorists to the likely presence of bicycles. This will serve as an important interim measure for those routes where grade separated pathways are planned in the future. Routes signed as ‘bike routes’ shall be regularly maintained for safe riding.

Assuming limited funding, the following routes shall receive priority for signage:

- Edgewood Road between Whitefish and Columbia Falls
- Airport Road/Foy's Lake loop
- Hwy 93 between Kalispell and Whitefish
- Hwy 2 between Kalispell and West Glacier

These routes were chosen as priorities because they currently receive substantial use but pose safety concerns.

Opportunistic Trail Development - Opportunities for trail development will arise as land is developed and road infrastructure is upgraded. This process will parallel active efforts to complete priority projects listed above. While many of these trail segments at first may be isolated, connectivity will be established as momentum builds and the trail network grows. With a trails plan adopted by the county and incorporated into all pertinent planning and regulatory documents, future land development and transportation projects can contribute many new miles towards the envisioned Flathead County Trail Network.

Land development and the subdivision review process - Subdivision review must be conducted in compliance with this trails plan, as part of the growth policy. Land undergoing subdivision review is subject to transportation requirements, including non-motorized travel. The county shall require developers to build public pathways in dedicated minimum 25' rights-of-way, to connect their developments to the county trail network. A maintenance plan for these trails shall also be required.

Road construction and reconstruction projects - Non-motorized travel shall be a routine element to be considered in every transportation project. Newly constructed roads shall be designed to service all public use, not just motor vehicles. New arterial roads shall be equipped with pathways and either bike lanes or shoulder bikeways. New collector roads shall be equipped with the appropriate non-motorized facility (pathways and/or bike lanes/shoulder bikeways) to ensure safety, given the level of expected use.

Whenever existing roads serving as arterial trail routes, as identified in this plan, are reconstructed, pathways shall be included, and shall be supplemented with bike lanes or shoulder bikeways. Whenever roads identified by this plan as connector trail routes are reconstructed or improved (widened, repaved, restriped, etc), the appropriate non-motorized facilities shall be included. Whenever roads not identified in this plan as trail routes are reconstructed or improved, the needs of non-motorized users shall be considered and accommodated wherever possible.

Trail Maintenance - Flathead County pathways have a maintenance backlog. A comprehensive field assessment of the condition of all existing trails needs to be undertaken to identify and prioritize maintenance needs to bring aging trails up to specification.

Two routine annual maintenance priorities are:

- Perform winter snow removal along all routes in the vicinity of schools.
- Perform regular routine maintenance of all signed “bike routes”, including spring debris sweeping and winter snow removal.

Recommendations for Trails Program Implementation

Establish a Flathead County Trails Program using a public/private partnership consisting of county departments, the PATHS Advisory Committee and a private sector non-profit partner. The Parks Department shall take lead responsibility for program implementation, with major involvement by the Roads Department and the Planning Department. The PATHS Advisory committee shall become a standing advisory body to the Parks Department, and will actively aid the Parks Department in steering the program. A non-profit partner shall be recruited for trail program fundraising efforts and to build community support. Developing a sustainable, long-term funding mechanism is key to ensuring successful development and operation of the trails network.

Adopt this Trails Plan and incorporate it into all pertinent planning and regulatory documents such as the county growth policy, transportation plan, and capital improvement plan. Subdivision review shall be conducted in compliance with this trails plan, as part of the growth policy. Pathways, roadway bike/ped facilities, and community walkability shall be considered transportation infrastructure on equal footing with motor vehicle facilities. By integrating the trails program throughout the transportation planning and land development review processes, non-motorized transportation system connectivity can be accomplished as a routine element of capital and maintenance projects.

Develop a variety of programs, projects and policies that support non-motorized transportation and recreation. Along with developing the trail infrastructure, greater use of the trails network shall be encouraged. Promotional programs and trails events can spread information about the trail network and the benefits of using it, thereby encouraging more people to choose to travel without their automobiles. Convenience features like bike racks, benches and signage can make a big difference. Bike safety programs targeted to children and adult bicyclists as well as motorists can teach users how to share the road safely. A policy of building “Complete Streets” (see appendix E) invites the full range of users onto county transportation facilities in safety and with confidence. And more people will make short trips by bicycle or on foot if mixed-use development becomes more common, and safe transportation facilities are available.

Introduction

Surrounded by the towering mountains of Glacier National Park, Wilderness areas and Flathead National Forest, and encompassing pristine lakes, rivers and fertile valleys, Flathead Valley is one of the most beautiful places on earth. The county is a favorite destination for outdoor enthusiasts, and tourism comprises one of the largest sectors of the economy. The valley is supported by three regional centers that are located within 15 miles of each other.

Flathead County has strong roots in agriculture and forest products, but is rapidly becoming urban. Between 2000 and 2006, the county's population increased 15% to 85,300, the second fastest growing county in Montana. Traffic is increasing on county roads and state highways, jeopardizing the safety of non-motorized users. Development threatens to cut off access to some of the open space, public lands and recreational opportunities in the area.

Much of the area's growth has occurred as the three municipalities of Kalispell, Whitefish, and Columbia Falls grew and expanded at a combined rate of 39%. These cities have made great strides in planning and developing municipal trail systems. Yet 68% of the county - 53,500 people - live in the rural areas of the county, and don't have the benefit of a trails network connecting them to other parts of the county. Currently, there are only about 33 miles of pathway in the county outside of the municipalities. Most of these were projects conceived and executed by citizen initiative, and have little connectivity.

Trails provide myriad benefits to communities, including transportation, recreation, health, social, economic, and quality-of-life benefits. As an essential component of an integrated transportation system, a countywide non-motorized trail network is needed to connect communities to each other and to the county's parks, forests, lakes, and rivers.

Public scoping has indicated strong support for a regional trail system. Now is the time for trails planning, before rapid development forecloses any more opportunities. A well-thought-out trails plan will provide county planners, landowners, and developers with a framework for trails-related subdivision review and help ensure that trails are incorporated into all future development decisions. It will also help decision-makers set priorities for trail development.

Background - The 2009 Flathead County Parks and Recreation Master Plan contains a description of the geographic and demographic characteristics of Flathead County. The narrative in that document encompasses land area, natural features, public lands, open space, transportation, settlement patterns, population density, seasonal population, demographics, household characteristics, and population disabilities.

Relationship of Trails Plan to Other Planning Documents

Growth Policy - In 2007, the Flathead County Board of County Commissioners adopted a Growth Policy. A growth policy is an official statement of public policy to guide growth and manage change for the betterment of the community. The Growth Policy includes a Park and Recreation element, which recommended that a Parks and Recreation Master Plan be undertaken and adopted as an appendix to the Growth Policy.

Parks and Recreation Master Plan – The Parks and Recreation Master Plan expands the analysis that is contained within the Growth Policy and provides programmatic recommendations for park and recreation development. The Trails Master Plan provides specific recommendations regarding a county trails network, as an element of the overall Parks and Recreation Program. The Trails Plan is intended to be adopted by reference into the Parks and Recreation Master Plan, and therefore the Growth Policy.

Other County Plans – To ensure effective implementation, it is recommended that the Trails Master Plan be incorporated by reference into all other pertinent county plans and documents, including the subdivision ordinance, the transportation plan, and the capital improvement plan.

Benefits of Trails - Trails provide multiple benefits to communities. Numerous studies have identified and quantified many ways in which trails benefit individuals and improve communities:

- Trails offer alternative modes of transportation to motorized vehicles, connecting homes with parks, offices, and shopping areas, and providing children with safe routes to schools. As transportation corridors, trails improve public safety and contribute to a healthier environment, with cleaner air and less traffic congestion.
- Trails can serve a wide range of recreationists including bicyclists, walkers, joggers, equestrians, in-line skaters, bird-watchers, picnickers, people in wheelchairs, and parents with strollers. Trails can provide access to fishing, wildlife-watching, vista points for photography, picnic areas for socializing, and areas for enjoying solitude in the natural environment.
- Trails promote health and fitness by providing an enjoyable and safe place for urban and rural residents to exercise regularly. Health problems such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes and obesity are all linked to a lack of exercise. Walking, bicycling and similar activities are excellent forms of exercise that nearly everyone can do, yet many people do not because they have no safe, convenient place to go. Trails provide that place.
- Trails contribute to economic vitality and increases in regional tourism. Many studies have shown that trail development stimulates local economies, increases local tax revenue, attracts tourists seeking new recreational opportunities, and revitalizes business districts.
- Trails contribute to increased property values. Access to trails is one of the most critical amenities that home buyers seek, and the value of most properties is enhanced

by being near a trail. Corporations seek attractive communities that offer trails and open space when choosing where to locate new plants and offices.

- Trails function as meeting places for the community, leading to greater interactions among residents and improved community cohesion.
- Trails provide opportunities to interpret the natural environment, history, and culture. Trails can serve as outdoor classrooms for schools.
- Parks and greenway trails (linear parks) protect natural resources, provide wildlife corridors, and preserve open space by defining zones free of human habitation and development.

Planning Process - The Flathead County Weed and Park Board created an advisory committee in 2008 to develop a countywide non-motorized trails master plan. Convening in February, the PATHS Advisory Committee (People, Athletics, Travel, Health, and Safety) met regularly for the next 18 months. Their planning process included gathering public input through meetings, workshops and surveys, reviewing the county's history of planning and building trails, developing goals and policies, creating base maps, meeting with technical advisers from local governments, state and federal agencies and the private sector, analyzing trail plans from other communities, developing a proposed trail network, and working on an implementation and funding strategy. This *Flathead County Trails Plan* is the result.

Community Attitudes and Desires - Public attitudes and desires regarding a countywide trails system were solicited through a variety of mechanisms. Press releases, the county website, and a listserve were used to inform the public about the process. Monthly PATHS meetings were advertised and open to the public, and residents used these venues to ask questions and express their views. Outreach efforts piggybacked onto similar efforts made by the concurrent parks and recreation master planning process, both for efficiency and to help clarify the distinction between the two.

Four community workshops were held in November of 2008 in Somers, Columbia Falls, Creston and Kila. Forty-three workshop attendees heard about the trails planning process and work accomplished to date, viewed maps depicting proposed trail locations, exchanged ideas with PATHS members, expressed opinions, and filled out a trails survey.

This survey was also posted on the county website in two ways: as a stand-alone trails survey, and integrated into a larger park and recreation survey. There were 125 online responses to the trails survey, and about 400 responses to the online parks survey, which contained essentially the same trails questions. The responses were very similar in character to those in the 40 surveys received at the 4 workshops: Very strong support was expressed for an expanded trails system; only a handful of respondents opposed more trails. A strong desire was expressed for countywide trail network connectivity, particularly connecting communities with parks and public lands, and connecting the major communities of the valley with each other via safe commuter trails. Many comments also were received calling for developing off-road pathways whenever

possible, and wider road shoulders with better maintenance to make roads safer for shared use. Many specific suggestions were made for trail priorities, as well. See appendix L for the survey and a compilation of responses.

Mission, Vision, Goals and Policies

Mission

The Flathead County PATHS Advisory Committee will create a comprehensive non-motorized trails plan for Flathead County.

Vision

A safe and convenient network of non-motorized trails connects Flathead County communities, schools, parks and public lands for the benefit of our families, our economy and our environment.

Goals

- Create a continuous network of pathways and on-road facilities that connect residential areas, schools, parks, recreation areas, public lands, retail/business centers, and community event centers.
- Provide opportunities for people to be physically active using trails as close-to-home recreational amenities, and ensure children have convenient and safe routes to schools.
- Connect major population hubs with each other via direct arterial trails that provide safe, efficient and enjoyable opportunities for non-motorized commuting.
- Provide high-quality non-motorized recreational trails primarily on public lands. Ensure connectivity between new recreational trails, existing trails in Flathead National Forest and Glacier National Park, and the rest of the county trail network.
- Increase the percentage of trips made by bicycling and walking in the county, reduce the number of traffic injuries, and increase the number of non-motorized trail users.
- Establish an effective administrative framework for the trail system.
- Ensure the trail network is well-maintained.
- Improve non-motorized safety through pedestrian, bicyclist and motorist education and enforcement.
- Use a variety of strategies to acquire sufficient funding to construct and maintain the proposed trail system within the next 20 years.

Policies

- Promote land use planning and development that expands and connects with the county trail network, encourages pedestrian and bicycle travel, and reduces vehicle trip generation.
- Through the subdivision review process, ensure that new residential development contributes to and connects with the community trails system. Trails identified in this plan shall be provided as a condition of subdivision approval.
- Consider pedestrian and bicycle facilities as a routine part of transportation system planning.
- Pathways are the preferred facility for arterial trail routes between community hubs. Pathways shall be included in all projects to reconstruct these roads, and shall be supplemented with on-road facilities such as bike lanes or shoulder bikeways to accommodate bicycle commuters who prefer to ride on the road surface.
- Whenever roads identified in this plan as connector trail routes are reconstructed or improved (widened, repaved, restriped, etc.), appropriate non-motorized facilities shall be included.
- Whenever roads not identified in this plan as trail routes are reconstructed or improved, the needs of non-motorized users shall be considered and accommodated wherever possible.
- Newly constructed arterial roads shall be equipped with pathways and either bike lanes or shoulder bikeways. New collector roads shall be equipped with the appropriate non-motorized facility (pathways and/or bike lanes/shoulder bikeways) to ensure safety, given the level of expected use.
- Design and maintain trails to a high standard to ensure a successful trail system. Use AASHTO guidance for the design of pathways and on-road facilities.
- Provide a wide spectrum of trail-related recreational opportunities for a variety of activities, skill levels, and types of experiences. Minimize conflicts between users.
- Locate trails on public lands wherever possible.
- Ensure safe trail crossings of roads and highways.
- Provide ADA accessibility wherever possible
- Ensure preservation of wildlife habitat and natural resources. Avoid environmentally sensitive areas.

- Respect and protect the rights of trail-side landowners.
- Plan 20 years into the future

Proposed Trail Network

Definition of “Trail” - In this plan, the term ‘trail’ is used in a broad sense, referring to multi-use pathways, single-track trails, and backcountry roads. It also is used to describe routes along shared roadways, where bicyclists (and to a lesser extent pedestrians) are directed and accommodated. While it may seem counter-intuitive to refer to a wide shoulder along a busy highway as a ‘trail’, shared roadways provide the lion’s share of the county’s non-motorized transportation facilities, and demand critical attention. Non-motorized facilities along roadways shall be an integral part of county transportation planning.

Types of Trails

Pathways - Pathways (also called “shared use pathways”, “multi-use pathways”, or “grade-separated pathways”) are physically separated from motorized vehicular traffic by open space or a barrier, and have minimal cross-traffic. They can be located either inside a road right-of-way or within an independent right-of-way or easement. Pathways offer opportunities not provided by the road system, such as recreation in a natural setting. They also provide safe and direct commuter routes that preclude motor vehicles, circumvent obstacles, and connect community features. Linear open spaces such as streams, rail corridors, and utility corridors can provide excellent locations for pathways.

Pathways provide a very attractive recreational amenity to a variety of non-motorized users. Pathways accommodate a wide range of users, including bicyclists, walkers, joggers, wildlife watchers, rollerbladers, wheelchair users, dog walkers, skiers, seniors, and young families with strollers. Equestrians often can be accommodated by including a natural surface trail parallel to the pathway within the trail right-of-way. Pathways providing access to schools shall be maintained (swept, plowed) year-round. Other pathways can be left snow-covered or even groomed in winter for use by skiers and snowshoers.

Bicycle commuters interested in direct, high-speed travel may not be compatible with heavy use by slower-moving recreational users, and in fact, often prefer a shared roadway facility such as a bike lane or shoulder bikeway. Pathways should be thought of as a necessary extension of the roadway network, not as a reason to preclude on-road bicycle facilities.

Pathways along highways are appropriate in rural areas, where road crossings are minimal. Pathways in urban areas can be challenging to design because motor vehicles and bicyclists/pedestrians must frequently cross each other’s paths, due to numerous cross streets and driveways. In areas of dense traffic and numerous crossings, pathways shall be built on both sides of the road.

Recommended pathway widths and surfaces will vary depending on the type of user and volume of use expected, and the experience desired. Pathway design guidance is given in

the Guide for the Development of Bicycle Facilities by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, 1999¹. AASHTO guidelines call for paved pathways 8-12' wide in situations of high use with multiple types of users. Wide, paved pathways are especially suitable in alignments parallel to major roads, where the pathway is serving a strong transportation function. In natural settings, compacted gravel trails 5-6' wide can be more appropriate, considerably less expensive to build, yet still handicapped accessible.

All pathways shall be sited within a trail corridor with a minimum width of 25 feet to ensure adequate room for trail construction, maintenance and use. Trail corridors may either be a public dedicated right-of-way or a public easement. Pathways within road rights-of-way shall be located so that road maintenance activities such as sweeping and snow plowing do not adversely impact the pathway, and pathway maintenance activities do not adversely affect the road.

Shared Roadways - Most bicycle travel in the United States occurs on roads shared with motor vehicles. Montana statutes (MCA 61-8-602 through 608) make bicyclists legitimate road users and define requirements of bicyclists using roadways. To a varying extent, bicycles will be used on most county roads and state highways. Pedestrians also will walk along roads, particularly near residential areas, when sidewalks or pathways have not been provided. Gravel rural roads with little traffic also may be attractive to equestrians.

It would be impractical in terms of expense and unnecessary in terms of adequate safety and user demand to rely exclusively on pathways to satisfy the county's non-motorized transportation needs. Pathways along roads are recommended to separate motorized and non-motorized users in high-demand corridors, or to provide a more enjoyable recreational experience in specific situations. But many county roads are capable of safely accommodating non-motorized use, either in their current condition or with minor roadway modifications. While the presence of bicyclists and pedestrians should be expected along all county roads, this plan designates certain county roads as trails, meaning they are preferred corridors for bicycle traffic.

These designated routes are attractive to bicyclists because they provide efficient, safe travel corridors that connect common destination areas across the county. The varying experience level of bicyclists must be taken into account, however. Experienced bicycle commuters are using their bicycles as they would a motor vehicle. They are riding for

¹ *The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials' (AASHTO) "Guide for the Development of Bicycle Facilities", revised in 1999, is the principal resource for bicycle facility design in the United States and has been adopted by many state and local governments. The guide discusses general design characteristics of roadway improvements for bicycles and identifies design standards for pathways used by bicyclists. Minimum design standards are provided only where further deviation would result in unacceptable safety compromises.*

convenience and speed and want direct access to destinations with a minimum of detour or delay. They typically are comfortable riding with motor vehicles, but need their own operating space. Less confident adult bicyclists riding for transportation or recreation prefer to avoid busy roads unless there is an ample shoulder. Children going to school need routes offering maximal safety.

Preferred bicycle routes are either ‘signed shared roadways’, shoulder bikeways’, or ‘bike lanes’. All three shall be signed as “bike routes” to guide bicyclists and to alert motorists. Signage shall be in accordance with the Manual of Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD), and shall include information on direction and destination to encourage use.

Roadway width is the most important variable affecting the ability of a roadway to safely accommodate bicyclists and pedestrians alongside motorists. Other factors include gradient, alignment, pavement condition, traffic volume and traffic speed. Bike routes shall be constructed or improved to standards that allow for safe non-motorized use.

Signed shared roadways - Some of the roadways designated as trails in this plan will need no special facilities other than signage as bike routes, due to low traffic volumes and slow speeds. This situation may change as the area grows and traffic conflicts increase. Non-motorized transportation safety should be periodically assessed and improvements made as needed.

Other routes designated as trails in this plan have higher traffic volumes and speeds. For safety purposes, adequate width in a dedicated corridor for bicycles (shoulder bikeways or bike lanes) is essential. Many of these routes are currently unsafe or will become so as traffic increases, and roadway modifications such as additional width and/or striping are warranted.

Shoulder bikeways - Paved road shoulders delineated by a lane stripe (fog line) provide a measure of safety for bicyclists and pedestrians along more heavily traveled and higher-speed county roads. Other conditions that could warrant the addition of paved shoulders include narrow road widths, steep gradients, or poor sight distances. Very heavy traffic or high speeds will make shoulder use uncomfortable for less experienced bicyclists and most pedestrians, and a pathway will be more appropriate.

Paved shoulders have benefits beyond the safety and comfort of non-motorized users.

According to MDTs Road Design Manual, road shoulders can:

- extend the service life of the road surface by significantly reducing edge deterioration;
- provide space for emergency and discretionary stops;
- increase road capacity;
- encourage uniform travel speeds;
- improve safety by providing more recovery area for run-off-the-road vehicles;
- provide a sense of openness;
- improve sight distance around horizontal curves;
- enhance highway aesthetics;
- facilitate maintenance operations;

- provide additional lateral clearance to roadside appurtenances (e.g., guardrail, traffic signals); and
- facilitate pavement drainage.

Paved shoulders should be at least 4' wide outside of the lane stripe. Wider shoulders are desirable where higher bicycle usage is expected, where motor vehicle speeds exceed 50 mph, or where the percentage of trucks, buses and recreational vehicles is high. However, if this isn't possible, any additional width of paved shoulder is an improvement. Where funding is limited, adding or improving shoulders on uphill sections will decrease conflicts.

Bike lanes – Bike lanes are portions of roadways designated for the preferential or exclusive use of bicyclists. They provide for more predictable movements by both bicyclists and motorists, and are utilized primarily by experienced, commuting cyclists who desire a convenient, direct route to their destinations. Bike lanes are generally established on urban arterials or collector streets where there is significant bicycle demand and where motor vehicle speeds are relatively high. While most suitable on the major thoroughfares through the municipalities, there may be appropriate circumstances for continuing a bike lane along roads extending into the county, as they provide an additional measure of safety over shoulder bikeways due to their heightened visibility.

Bike lanes are delineated with striping, signing, and pavement markings². Road shoulders can be marked to become bike lanes. Bike lanes are one-way facilities, optimally 4-5' wide, with a bike lane on each side of the road. They can increase the total capacity of roads carrying mixed bicycle and motor vehicle traffic. Bike lanes often are established where insufficient space currently exists for safe and comfortable bicycling on existing streets. Bike lanes may be created without widening the paved surface by reducing existing travel lane widths or by prohibiting parking. Vegetated boulevards (the area between the street and sidewalk) sometimes can be reconfigured to provide pocket parking to make more room for on-street travel.

Sidewalks - Sidewalks are usually found in city street cross-sections along with concrete curbs and gutters. Some rural roads that pass through community commercial districts have sidewalks, and larger county residential areas developed in the future may include sidewalks for internal pedestrian use. These shall connect with the county's trail network.

While sidewalks can be built to widths sufficient to support shared use, generally sidewalks are appropriate only for pedestrians. Improved pedestrian facilities, including road crossings, should be provided near schools, community centers, trailheads and other significant points.

Backcountry trails - Backcountry trails are recreational facilities usually located on public lands, and often traversing rugged, forested terrain. Commonly constructed as 18–

² A thermoplastic material is commonly used. While more expensive than paint, it is far more durable.

36” wide natural-surface trails, these routes are attractive to hikers, mountain bikers and equestrians.

There are numerous existing backcountry trails in the county located on federal lands. Glacier National Park features a system of premier hiking trails, and Flathead National Forest has an established system of singletrack trails. The national forest also has many gravel and dirt backcountry roads which are attractive to non-motorized recreationists, but also to motorcycles, ATVs, and 4WD vehicles. Forest Service travel management planning should provide equitable opportunities for high-quality non-motorized recreation throughout the forest. Where non-motorized opportunities are limited or unreasonably degraded by heavy motorized use, the Forest Service should consider closing some trails and roads to motors and/or constructing new non-motorized trails.

Opportunities exist to construct additional singletrack trails on state and federal lands connecting the county’s natural amenities with its communities. One ongoing effort called “A Trail Runs Through It” seeks to circumnavigate the city of Whitefish largely on lands owned by MT DNRC.

Several excellent design and construction manuals are available to assist in development of new singletrack trails (see appendix G).

Trail Network Components - This plan proposes an interconnected network of trails throughout the county for transportation, recreation, health, safety and other purposes. Rather than describing the proposed trail system in terms of specific facilities (pathway, shoulder bikeway, bike lane, signed shared roadway, or singletrack trail), this plan describes proposed trails in terms of their primary function: arterial trail, connector trail, or recreational trail.

Arterial trails provide direct commuter routes between major communities. Connector trails provide safe, non-motorized transportation routes linking common destinations within and between communities. Recreational trails respond to the needs of communities throughout the county for close-to-home recreational amenities.

Specific trail types have not been proposed (in most cases) because such a recommendation is dependent on circumstances that change over time, such as traffic congestion, bicycle/pedestrian demand, site constraints, and available resources, including the contributed resources of future trail proponents. The most appropriate and feasible trail type for any situation can best be determined following detailed site planning.

This statement is primarily true for those trail routes located along roads. While it is a policy of this trails plan to construct pathways along all arterial trail routes wherever feasible, circumstances might dictate that a shoulder bikeway will have to suffice for many years until a road can be reconstructed.

Arterial Trails - Arterial trails provide direct commuter routes between Flathead County's major communities. They feed non-motorized traffic to, and collect it from, the rest of the countywide trail network, and shall be constructed to a high standard. Ideally, these trails will be located along a separate right-of-way, such as along a watercourse, rail line, ridgeline, or utility right-of-way, for maximum user experience. However, given limited opportunity, most will be located on or along county roads and state highways. For safety and optimal user experience, grade-separated pathways are the preferred facility for arterial trails, particularly alongside high-speed, high volume motorized traffic. Bike lanes or shoulder bikeways may be provided in addition to pathways to accommodate experienced bicycle commuters who may find roadway facilities more convenient, better maintained, and faster. Separation also avoids conflict with slower moving or more recreationally-oriented pathway users.

Continuity of arterial trails shall be ensured. If a pathway cannot be sited along the entire route, some other type of shared roadway facility must be provided to fill the gap, and the entire route shall be clearly signed. Ideally, changes between types of trail facilities should be minimized.

Connector Trails - Connector trails provide safe, non-motorized transportation routes linking common destinations within and between communities. These trails bring users to (or near) schools, business and commercial centers, cultural attractions, parks, and public lands. This county trails plan must be augmented by more-detailed neighborhood trails plans which can specify local trail connections between connector trails and community facilities.

Most connector trails will be located on roadways, either as shoulder bikeways, bike lanes, or signed shared roadways, depending on traffic volume and speed. Near communities, and/or where there is local demand for an enhanced user experience and available right-of-way, shared-use pathways may be preferred. Pathways also may be indicated to resolve unsafe situations.

Recreational Trails - Recreational trails primarily provide recreation destinations rather than transportation corridors. Recreational trails respond to the needs of communities throughout the county for close-to-home recreational amenities.

Most of these trail proposals are located on state and federal lands through parks, forests, and other open lands, and along streams, Flathead River and Flathead Lake. One notable exception is a potential trail through private lands along the north shore of Flathead Lake. While pathways may be appropriate in places, singletrack trails typically will be used in most backcountry situations. For purposes of continuity and/or expediency, proposed recreational trail routes may make use of existing backcountry roads or old logging roads. A prime example of this is the proposed Foys-to-Blacktail Trail linking Foys Lake and Heron Park with the Blacktail ski resort via a series of existing backcountry roads and

trails primarily on the national forest and lands currently owned by Plum Creek and F.H. Stoltze. The trail proposal restricts this trail to non-motorized users.

The distinction between recreational and commuter trails, of course, is not absolute. Recreational trails may serve a transportation function for some users, just as there will be a recreational component to the use of arterial and connector trails.

Water Trails - Public desire was expressed for development of water trails. The idea of a linked system of access points, picnic sites, and camping areas connecting the lakes, rivers, and streams of the county has much appeal, but is best addressed by the county's parks master plan.

Destination Trails - Another idea expressed by the public was for developing a high-profile destination trail or trails that could draw national attention, with attendant economic benefits from events like tours or races. One suggestion was for an intra-county effort to develop a trail circumnavigating Flathead Lake. Another possibility is presented by the old rail bed between Kalispell and Eureka.

Proposed Trail Network Map - The trails map accompanying this plan (appendix M) depicts the proposed routes for the major network components – arterial, connector and recreational trails. For the reasons discussed above, specific trail types are not depicted on the map for these routes. The county's existing pathways are shown, as are some of the existing trails and roads in the national forest and Glacier National Park. For additional information on trails and roads on public lands, contact the USDA Forest Service, Montana DNRC and Glacier National Park.

Consistent with this trails plan, the map depicts a long-term vision for an integrated countywide trail network. Its realization will occur incrementally, as roads are rebuilt, land is developed, and priority trails projects are funded. It is hoped that this visual display of a functional countywide non-motorized transportation system will help energize trails proponents from all sectors of society to work with the fledgling county trails program in realizing the vision.

Administration

The trail network envisioned by this plan can be effectively implemented only if some county-sanctioned entity takes lead responsibility for directing a program of planning, advocacy, fund raising, acquisition, construction, maintenance and monitoring. Dedicated staff and a dependable budget are needed for consistent focus and steady program implementation, to take advantage of opportunities as they arise, to maintain assets, and to ensure trails are considered as a routine part of county planning and administration.

Potential Partners in Trail Program Administration - While some communities have experienced a certain level of success with trail development efforts led by the private sector, in most cases this method is haphazard, unreliable, and insufficient for a successful county-wide program; Flathead County's trail development history to date is testament to this fact. County government must take an active lead role in development and administration of a trails program. Given the breadth of challenges presented by such an undertaking, it will be advantageous to establish partnerships that can capitalize on the strengths and capacity of other entities.

Following are some potential contributors to an administrative team.

County Departments - Three Flathead County departments with missions that could embrace all or part of a trails program are Planning and Zoning, Parks and Recreation, and Roads and Bridges.

Planning and Zoning Department – The primary responsibilities of the Flathead County Planning and Zoning Department include assisting in all facets of long range community and neighborhood planning, zoning administration and subdivision review. The Office administers the county's lakeshore protection program and floodplain program, as well as the CTEP (Community Transportation Enhancements Program). Staff is involved with education and coordination, and uses other tools and strategies to protect and maintain property values, public investment, the built and natural environment, and the general quality of life and community character for residents and visitors.

Parks and Recreation Department – The department is divided into 4 sub-departments: Parks, Recreation, Weeds and Building Maintenance. The Parks Department has an inventory of over 70 parks, with 32 parks that are regularly maintained, some with pathways as amenities. Other parks receive brushing and thinning to aid in fire prevention. The Parks Department has partnered with MT Fish, Wildlife and Parks to help develop a water access site at a recently acquired park on Church Slough. The Parks Department also partners with the Flathead National Forest and the Northshore Nordic Club in maintaining the Blacktail Cross Country Ski Trails, by brushing, thinning and mowing the site in late fall and plowing the parking lots in the winter.

The Recreation Department manages the county's recreational activities for youth, adults and various supporting organizations in the Flathead Valley, such as softball, basketball, flag football, volleyball, and t-ball. The department recently applied for a grant to help improve amenities at the Sports Complex, replacing fencing, dugouts, adding bleachers and improving bathrooms.

The Weed Department operates and performs over \$150,000 in annual contract work with the MT Department of Transportation, MT Fish, Wildlife & Parks, MT Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Glacier National Park, Flathead National Forest, Bonneville Power Administration and the Flathead Conservation District. The Weed program uses an integrated approach to weed control with roadside mowing, revegetation, biocontrol releases, herbicide applications and a fine-tuned education and compliance program. This program has been in contact with over 3,500 landowners, educating and initiating weed management plans to comply with the State Noxious Weed Law.

The Building Maintenance Department is responsible for keeping public facilities safe and clean, performing building upgrades, improving facility energy efficiency, and assessing/remediating health issues (e.g. asbestos). The department also maintains the grounds of the courthouse complex and removes snow from parking lots and sidewalks.

Roads and Bridges Department - The department is divided into 3 sub-departments: Roads, Bridges, and the County Shop. The Road Department conducts snow plowing in the winter months, and general road maintenance and major construction projects in the non-winter months. Monitoring traffic safety is a major concern. Some of the other areas of responsibilities are encroachments for utility installations, approach encroachments, and road reviews for subdivisions. The Bridge Department maintains approximately 100 bridges and approximately 700 culverts, cattle passes and cattle guards. They install and maintain all guardrails, and maintain the county's several dikes. The County Shop maintains approximately 290 county-owned vehicles and pieces of equipment which are operated by Road, Bridge, Shop, Sheriff, Commissioners, Animal Control, Eagle Transit, Health/Sanitation, Juvenile Detention, County Attorney, and the Disaster and Emergency Services Departments. All aspects of vehicle maintenance and repairs are performed.

County Advisory Committee – The PATHS Advisory Committee was convened to develop a trails plan, with a lifetime limited to a couple of years, as originally envisioned. However, the advisory committee could be given permanent standing, staffed by a county department employee, and charged with numerous tasks. These tasks could include: prioritizing trail development opportunities; participating in subdivision review to ensure new development complies with the trails plan; ensuring that all planning and capital improvement efforts in the county consider trails; assisting with fundraising efforts by writing or reviewing grants; and generally advocating for development of the trails system.

Non-Profit Organizations – Private sector organizations can be very helpful in implementing a trails program. In some Montana communities, land trusts, service organizations and recreation clubs have spearheaded efforts to develop trails and to organize volunteers to adopt trail segments, hold clean-up events, and rebuild eroded sections. These organizations can provide the necessary passion to build community support, raise money, develop momentum, and lead projects.

Recommended Administrative Structure - The Directors of the three departments met in April of 2009 to discuss responsibilities for improved maintenance of existing trails. Their memorandum to the county commissioners recognizes the county's substantial investment in trails, citizens concerns about maintenance, and the need to address potential liabilities. They agreed a maintenance plan is needed to address basic tasks such as: snow removal, weed control, mowing, sign installation and repair, sweeping of debris, pot hole and asphalt repairs, parking, and tree trimming and removal. Toward this end, the three directors requested funds to purchase a Kabota or Bobcat-type implement with all attachments, a part-time winter employee for the Roads Department for pathway snow removal, and a part-time summer employee for the Parks Department to perform all other listed maintenance tasks. The total one-year cost is estimated at \$85,360, and subsequent year costs are estimated at \$20,360. The memorandum notes that this increased commitment by the county could provide an incentive for other groups to contribute to the effort.

Maintenance is a critical piece of a successful trails program, and inter-departmental cooperation and partnership with other entities is absolutely appropriate. However, to realize the goals of this trails plan, Flathead County needs a complete trails program, not merely a plan for trail maintenance.

One of the county departments shall be assigned lead responsibility to ensure steady, proactive progress towards trails program implementation, The Parks Department is best situated for this role in terms of mission compatibility and customers served. The Parks Department is conversant with the multiple recreation needs of a diverse constituency, and has undertaken planning, outreach and education efforts on behalf of parks. Park management is its forte, and trails are basically linear parks. It has recently completed a Parks and Recreation Master Plan, into which this Trails Plan will be incorporated. Both the Parks Department and PATHS Advisory Committee are overseen by the Park Board.

As lead, the Parks Department will coordinate all aspects of the trails program, oversee the PATHS advisory committee, and act as liaison with private partners and volunteers. The funding request recently submitted to the commissioners for maintenance must be revisited to ensure adequate resources for the Parks Department's additional responsibilities.

The Planning Department will ensure subdivision review that includes compatibility with the trails plan, and will continue administrative responsibility for the CTEP program, with assistance from the PATHS Advisory Committee in prioritizing applications. The Roads and Bridges Department will perform or oversee certain construction and maintenance tasks, likely including all facets of trail routes on shared roadways.

The PATHS advisory committee shall be made a permanent committee advisory to the Park Board, staffed by the Parks Department, and charged with the tasks described above and any others useful to the Parks Department in implementing the trails program.

A private sector partner or partners shall be sought to work in cooperation with the county. The specific role(s) of this entity deserves careful thought. Its most useful functions might be to develop constituencies, advocate for trails, and raise funds. Developing a dues-paying membership, holding fund-raising events, writing grants, soliciting philanthropy, and developing educational programs will all be useful contributions to the trails program. A non-profit Parks and Trails Foundation could serve this function for trails as well as for parks, while also serving as an independent watchdog. Neighborhood groups advocating for specific trails projects also can be very useful, and their assistance should be welcomed.

Maintenance - Poorly maintained trails discourage use, undermine support for a trails program, create a safety hazard, and shorten the life of facilities. New trail projects must determine how maintenance will be accomplished and funded. Maintenance tasks may include mowing; sweeping; trash removal; tree/brush trimming; weed control; snow grooming and plowing; routine maintenance of bridges, benches, signage, bike racks and fencing; and minor/routine repairs such as re-striping and seal coating. Standard industry practice for protecting infrastructure investments is to allocate a percentage of the initial investment for annual upkeep. A conservative estimate for annual maintenance costs might be 3% of initial investment.

Potential sources of labor and equipment - The Flathead County Trails Program shall develop a multi-pronged approach to maintenance, drawing on a variety of sources for labor and funding. Funding is addressed in the following section. Potential sources of labor and equipment include:

County departments – Most trail maintenance responsibilities shall be handled by county departments. On-road connector trails such as bike lanes, shoulder bikeways and shared roadways can be maintained by the county Roads and Bridges Department at little to no additional cost, once these facilities are in place. The Parks Department can provide maintenance services for pathways. County Engineering could provide contract document preparation, bidding, and construction administration services.

Volunteers – Under the direction of the Parks Department, volunteers could donate their time and equipment to accomplish periodic maintenance on specific trail segments such as plowing snow, trimming vegetation, picking up trash, and rejuvenating eroded single-track trails. Common sources for volunteer manpower include civic organizations, conservation/recreation organizations, law enforcement community service programs and adopt-a-trail programs, as well as individuals. The county will either modify its insurance coverage to indemnify volunteer laborers, or accept the existing liability risk.

Homeowners associations – Subdivision developers shall be required to provide trails that connect their developments to the county trail network, and to produce maintenance plans for these trails. Homeowners Associations will be charged with performing maintenance on these trails.

Funding - Providing at least a basic level of funding for the county departments charged with implementing the trails program is key. Recruiting a private non-profit partner to assist with fundraising holds excellent promise. Competitive grants shall be actively sought. Pending widespread support for the trails program, taxpayer funding may be a future option.

Potential sources of funding

County departments – The Parks and Recreation Department and Roads and Bridges Department should receive base funding for carrying out their various responsibilities to administer the trails program.

Fundraising by non-profit partner - A non-profit partner should take responsibility for trail program fundraising efforts and to build community support. Tools could include selling memberships, holding fund-raising events, writing grants, and soliciting donors for a maintenance endowment fund.

Grants – Appendix G lists many public and private sources of grants for trail development. Two commonly used funding sources in Montana are the Recreational Trails Program and Community Transportation Enhancement Program, both part of the federal aid highway program, and both administered by the state. These, and most grants, are appropriate for trail development projects, but not for annual program expenses.

Sale of excess park land – If the Park Board determines that there are excess park lands, these properties can be sold and the proceeds used to fund elements of the trails program.

Cash-in-lieu funds – In some situations, it may be more advantageous to accept cash-in-lieu funds rather than land due from parkland dedication requirements.

In-kind donations – Individuals, organizations and businesses sometimes are willing to donate land, labor, equipment or materials to community projects such as trail construction. These donations often can be used as part of the required match for grants.

Taxes – A property mill tax levy could be used to create a long-term funding source for maintenance and operations. Since the county has reached its mill levy ceiling, a general election vote would be necessary to approve an increase in property taxes. A special improvement district, or park maintenance district, could be established to tax residents in defined neighborhoods serviced by trails. These districts can be established when larger subdivisions are approved, then activated as taxing entities when trail maintenance funding is needed. Other types of taxes that have been used elsewhere for this purpose include impact fees, real estate transfer taxes, resort taxes, and local option taxes on vehicle registration.

Bond initiative - County commissioners can ask electors to approve a bond for trail development, if the ceiling on bonded indebtedness has not been reached. Bonds allow communities to borrow money, which they often pay back over time through property taxes. Bond money can be used only to acquire lands and construct projects, not to maintain or manage them.

Implementation

Trail Development

Priority Projects – Proposed trail construction and improvement projects are evaluated based upon how well they address the following criteria:

- Services existing and/or anticipated demand
- Provides needed safety improvement
- Provides access to schools
- Connects communities with parks/public lands
- Provides an attractive, off-road travel corridor
- Connects existing trail segments (enhances network continuity)
- Provides connection between communities
- Provides trailhead facilities
- Provides a high quality recreational experience

An evaluation form has been developed for this purpose (see appendix C) . The form allows reviewers to rate trail proposals on each criteria, and weights the various criteria depending on their significance. This affords some level of objectivity in determining the relative importance of each particular trail proposal to the trail network as a whole.

The second part of the form calls for an evaluation of the real world parameters relevant to constructing the project, such as cost, dedicated funding and in-kind donations, whether easements or rights-of-way have been secured, whether a commitment has been made to maintain the trail, expressed local support or opposition, and other factors. These “administrative considerations” are not rated, but provide a mechanism for understanding the available resources and constraints associated with each specific trail proposal that is presented to the county.

Using just the first part of the evaluation form, a number of trail routes proposed in this plan have been identified as high priority, meaning they have high value to the county’s trail network and their development shall be actively pursued. The parameters discussed in the second part of the form cannot be evaluated yet for most of these routes, because the trail proposals are conceptual; information on costs, easements, contributed resources and public support is not available.

Priority trails for each of the three major network components are:

Arterial routes

- Somers to Lakeside (shared roadway)
- Whitefish Stage Road from Reserve Street in Kalispell to Whitefish (pathway)
- Hwy 40 from Whitefish to Columbia Falls (pathway)

Connector routes

- Airport Road/Foys Lake loop (pathway or shoulder bikeway)
- West Reserve Street, from Hwy 93 to Glacier High School (pathway)

- Echo Lake Road connecting the two existing Swan River pathways (pathway)
- Stillwater River past Flathead Valley Community College (pathway)
- Red Bridge restoration in Columbia Falls
- Kila to Marion rail-trail (pathway)

Recreational routes

- North Shore Flathead Lake from Somers to Big Fork (pathway)
- Foys-to-Blacktail system (backcountry trails and roads)
- A Trail Runs Through It (backcountry trails)

Priority arterial routes shall be constructed as grade-separated pathways wherever possible, and supplemented with either bike lanes or shoulder bikeways to accommodate commuting bicyclists. MDT shall be notified of the county's desire for pathways along state highways, so these facilities can be included in the state's plans for highway reconstruction and improvement. Many connector routes identified in this plan likely will be improved with shared roadway facilities, rather than pathways. These improvements shall be made as roads are reconstructed.

Understanding that proposed pathway construction may take years to accomplish, interim measures shall be undertaken to improve safety as opportunities arise. This could mean moving a fog line to slow traffic and widen a shoulder, improving shoulder snow removal or gravel sweeping, and similar measures.

"Bike route" signage shall be installed along all shared roadway trail routes. The purpose is to attract bicyclists to preferred routes and alert motorists to the likely presence of bicycles. This will serve as an important interim measure for those routes where grade separated pathways are planned in the future. Routes signed as 'bike routes' shall be regularly maintained for safe riding.

Assuming limited funding, the following routes shall receive priority for signage:

Bike routes

- Edgewood Road between Whitefish and Columbia Falls
- Airport Road/Foy's Lake loop
- Hwy 93 between Kalispell and Whitefish
- Hwy 2 between Kalispell and West Glacier

These routes were chosen as priorities because they currently receive substantial use but pose safety concerns.

Opportunistic Trail Development – Opportunities for trail development will arise as land is developed and road infrastructure is upgraded. This process will parallel active efforts to complete priority projects listed in the previous section. While many of these trail segments at first may be isolated, connectivity will be established as momentum builds and the trail network grows. With a trails plan adopted by the county and

incorporated into all pertinent planning and regulatory documents, future land development and transportation projects can contribute many new miles towards the envisioned Flathead County Trail Network.

Land development and the subdivision review process - Subdivision review must be conducted in compliance with this trails plan, as part of the growth policy. Land undergoing subdivision review is subject to transportation requirements, including non-motorized travel. The county shall require developers to build public pathways to county specifications in dedicated minimum 25' rights-of-way, to connect their developments to the county trail network in order to service local and countywide residents. These corridors needn't be sited immediately adjacent the road. Developers often provide trail connections even when not required as a matter of good business practice, since pathways though residential developments are a very important amenity sought by buyers these days³.

Subdivisions are also subject to parkland dedication requirements, which direct developers to set aside a portion of their development for parks (see appendix I). This requirement can be used to create greenways as linear parks. Land over and above the 25' width of the trail right-of-way could be used to satisfy parkland dedication requirements. Developers also shall be required to produce a maintenance plan for their trails.

Road construction and reconstruction projects – Non-motorized travel shall be a routine element to be considered in every transportation project. Newly constructed roads shall be designed to service all public use, not just motor vehicles. New arterial roads shall be equipped with pathways and either bike lanes or shoulder bikeways. New collector roads shall be equipped with the appropriate non-motorized facility (pathways and/or bike lanes/shoulder bikeways) to ensure safety, given the level of expected use.

Whenever existing roads serving as arterial trail routes, as identified in this plan, are reconstructed, pathways shall be included, and shall be supplemented with bike lanes or shoulder bikeways. Whenever roads identified by this plan as connector trail routes are reconstructed or improved (widened, repaved, restriped, etc), the appropriate non-motorized facilities shall be included. Whenever roads not identified in this plan as trail routes are reconstructed or improved, the needs of non-motorized users shall be considered and accommodated wherever possible.

The county's design specifications for road construction and re-construction currently call for 12' lanes on all roads – “arterials”, “collectors”, and “locals” - except those (“secondary roads”) with the least traffic. Design shoulder widths are 4' for arterials, 2' for collectors and paved local roads, and no shoulder for gravel local road and gravel secondary roads. These design specifications are being revisited as part of the ongoing

³ A 2002 survey of recent home buyers conducted by the National Association of Realtors and the National Association of Home Builders showed that trails ranked as the 2nd most important community amenity out of a list of 18 choices.

revision of the county transportation plan. Most of this plan's proposed arterial and connector trail routes are on arterial and collector roads.

Many communities are narrowing the commonly accepted standard 12' travel lane widths for several reasons: to encourage slower speeds, increase safety, and provide wider shoulders for non-motorized travel. Studies have documented that "road diets", when combined with other changes in the transportation system, are effective in actually improving traffic flow, lessening travel times, improving safety, and serving the needs of pedestrians and bicyclists. The MDT Road Design Manual states that travel lane widths on non-State highways can vary between 10' and 12', depending upon traffic volumes, functional class and design speed. Flathead County's transportation plan should recommend appropriate lane widths and bicycle-pedestrian facilities to fully address the needs of all public users of the transportation system.

Current Trail Development Efforts – Many trail development efforts in Flathead county have been led by local trails advocates. Several such efforts are ongoing currently, along with a major MDT highway project.

Great Northern Rail-Trail – Rails to Trails of Northwest Montana (www.railstotrailsofnwmt.com) has developed 16 miles of paved pathway along the old rail line from Somers north along US 93 to Ashley Creek south of Kalispell, and from Meridian Road in Kalispell west along state highway 2 through Kila. The two segments need to be connected, and extended west to the county line.

A Trail Runs Though It – MT DNRC, Flathead Gateway Partners, the City of Whitefish, USDA Forest Service, and a private landowner have been working for the past 5 years on an innovative plan to establish approximately 75 miles of singletrack recreational trail around the City of Whitefish, as part of a larger land protection effort. The first 10 miles is currently under construction.

Foys-to-Blacktail Trail – The non-profit organization Foys to Blacktail Trails, Inc. has been working since 2001 to protect traditional non-motorized access from Herron Park, near Kalispell, to a 47,000 acre Forest Service unit at Blacktail Mountain. The 20 mile proposed trail traverses county, federal and private timber lands. The project has inspired other groups to create a Lakeside to Blacktail Trail and a Kila to Blacktail Trail. If successful, these trails will form a backcountry non-motorized recreation system for these communities and create connection loops with the existing county trails network.

Kalispell Bypass Road – Phase 1 of this major infrastructure project is scheduled to begin construction in the near future. A 10' asphalt pathway and masonry sound barrier is planned along this road. This arterial trail will provide a key non-motorized transportation route around the city.

Echo Lake Road near Bigfork – The Bigfork Rotary Club has been working to extend a pathway along Echo Lake Road to connect with the existing pathway along the Swan

River, and the town of Bigfork. Recently, Rotary has been trying to activate a trail easement along this route that was donated to the county.

Sam Bibler trail – The Sam Bibler Commemorative Trails Project, a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt corporation, has been working to establish pathways along roads near the Flathead River and Owen Sowerwine Natural Area. The pathways would parallel Willow Glen Drive, Conrad Road, Woodland Avenue and Shady Lane, connecting to Lawrence Park.

Stillwater River trail and bridge – The Flathead Valley Community College, in partnership with a citizens group, is spearheading this effort to create a pathway from Reserve Street in Kalispell south along the Stillwater River to connect with the existing pathway in Lawrence Park. Part of the Old Steel Bridge has been purchased and is intended for use on this project to provide a crossing over the Stillwater.

Red Bridge restoration in Columbia Falls – The historic Red Bridge was built in 1911, and served for decades as a critical crossing point to the southeast. In 1989, it was taken out of service. The First Best Place Task Force in Columbia Falls intends to return this bridge to use as a pedestrian and bicycle crossing.

Future Opportunities – National trends in trail partnerships hold promise for the Flathead County Trails Program in terms of potential allies and possible funding.

Coordinate trails development with the health community - Close-to-home physical activity, especially when incorporated into people's everyday activities, can have a dramatically positive effect on health. Much research has linked the nation's obesity epidemic to a lack of physical exercise. Health care practitioners, clinics, and insurance providers have become actively involved around the country as partners in developing trails as a health initiative.

Coordinate trails development with the school districts - Opportunities may exist to jointly plan and develop trails used by children walking or biking to school, and to improve the safety, efficiency and convenience of school drop-off zones. School district participation could include direct funding contributions, use of school district lands, or trail maintenance on segments near schools. Montana's Nutrition and Physical Activity Program can assist the city and county in conducting planning workshops for safe routes to schools.

Trail Maintenance - Many of Flathead County's existing pathways are ten years old and in need of remedial maintenance, as well as signage. A comprehensive field assessment of the condition of all existing trails needs to be undertaken to identify and prioritize maintenance needs to bring aging trails up to specification. Specific maintenance tasks shall be considered high priority if they are needed to correct an unsafe situation, address a problem on a high use trail, or take advantage of a timely opportunity.

Priorities for routine annual maintenance

- Perform winter snow removal along all pathways in the vicinity of schools.
- Perform winter snow removal and spring debris sweeping of all signed “bike routes” on shared roadways.

Recommendations for Trails Program Implementation

Establish a Flathead County Trails Program using a public/private partnership

consisting of county departments, the PATHS Advisory Committee and a private sector non-profit partner. The Parks Department shall take lead responsibility for program implementation, with major involvement by the Roads Department and the Planning Department. The PATHS Advisory committee shall become a standing advisory body to the Parks Department, and will actively aid the Parks Department in steering the program. A non-profit partner shall be recruited for trail program fundraising efforts and to build community support. Developing a sustainable, long-term funding mechanism is key to ensuring successful development and operation of the trails network.

Adopt this Trails Plan and incorporate it into all pertinent planning and regulatory documents

such as the county growth policy, transportation plan, and capital improvement plan. Subdivision review shall be conducted in compliance with this trails plan, as part of the growth policy. Pathways, roadway bicycle/pedestrian facilities, and community walkability shall be considered transportation infrastructure on equal footing with motor vehicle facilities. By integrating the trails program throughout the transportation planning and land development review processes, non-motorized transportation system connectivity can be accomplished as a routine element of capital and maintenance projects.

Develop a variety of programs, projects and policies that support non-motorized transportation and recreation. Along with developing the trail infrastructure, greater use of the trails network shall be encouraged. Promotional programs and trails events can spread information about the trail network and the benefits of using it, thereby encouraging more people to choose to travel without their automobiles. Convenience features like bike racks, benches and signage can make a big difference. Bike safety programs targeted to children and adult bicyclists as well as motorists can teach users how to share the road safely. A policy of building “Complete Streets” (see appendix E) invites the full range of users onto county transportation facilities in safety and with confidence. And more people will make short trips by bicycle or on foot if mixed-use development becomes more common, and safe transportation facilities are available.